# Judaism Revealed in Unconventional Experiences

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*“Linda, please take my advice. Travel abroad when you are young and strong. Don’t wait until you are old because it might become too difficult to get around. Save America for last—when you are retired.”*

*—Mae Axelrod*

My passion in life was first ignited by listening to the wisdom of my paternal grandmother. Her name was Mae, an immigrant from Kiev, and she was the one who instilled in me the idea to start traveling as soon as I could. Mae was a cultured and very curious woman who always yearned to visit Europe. She constantly dreamed and talked about walking the winding streets of Italy to see some of the greatest works of art and architecture.

So finally, she and my grandfather made a trip to Europe. But when she finally fulfilled her lifelong dream of a voyage to Italy by boat in 1954, my grandfather had trouble walking, and it was difficult for him to move around. The trip was tiresome; he had no stamina, and the broken old streets were a challenge for both of them. They had waited too long, she told me, to go on a sightseeing trip. Needless to say, it was very disappointing. They finally took that

trip and could hardly see what they set sail to experience.

And so it was—upon graduating from college with an art degree and wanting to see all the great works of art—traveling became my greatest desire and passion. And following the advice of my grandmother, whom I greatly loved and adored, I listened to her wise words and was ready to hit the road as soon as I could. Never once did I consider a trip to the Caribbean. I wanted to see the exotic and culturally rich places first. After all, at 22 years of age, youth and strength were on my side, and although I had a small budget as a teacher, it made it all that much better, as I loved staying in tiny hostels and taking public transportation wherever possible. I did have the summertime free to explore, so I was not going to waste any time.

Then when I met my husband Josef, who seemed to share my passion. He agreed to close his business a few weeks in the summer so that we could take a trip. It all worked after a bit of maneuvering, and together we have spent our life visiting and exploring places that offered us the most interesting glimpse into other worlds. We loved meeting a variety of people, and we did it without organized tours, with only a carry-on suitcase, one pair of hiking boots, a copy of the Lonely Planet Guidebook, and a great deal of enthusiasm, curiosity, and guts.

We spent each year researching countries of interest and what was accessible to us for a visit. And this was even before computers, internet, and hotels.com. Little did we know that traveling would soon become an addiction, and I can say without question, it has been the most enriching thing we could do for ourselves. You find your real self while traveling, and the world is a true classroom for those who are interested in learning through experiences.

And then when we had our son Zohar, he also learned to share our passion and came with us on all our summer trips. We started him at five years old, and we knew that he would get much more out of traveling the world than going to camp or playing basketball. We equipped him with his own carry-on suitcase, taught him how to do his own laundry in the shower, and gave him a small allowance for purchasing souvenirs of his choice. It was because of him that we were actually able to get an invitation to visit Bhutan from the Royal Government. But that story is for later in this article. So from the age of five until he was 16, Zohar was part of our travel expeditions.

Of course, you can’t get to remote places, especially on a limited budget, without putting up with some discomforts. That is a given. Zohar was a real trooper, and I have to admit, so were we. But if the sights are worth it, then who cares about

the lack of running water, no electricity, snakes in the room, filthy streets, and frightening modes of transportation, not to mention having to take a slew of inoculations before going. It all goes with the territory, as they say.

But there was another added plus to our adventures that we had never anticipated. Traveling can take you on a spiritual journey into yourself. It can change how you interact with every aspect of the world, both as a person, and also surprisingly as a Jew. You get to know yourself better in so many different ways and on so many different levels. So, with nothing more than being lucky enough to have been raised in America where air travel is a possibility, I have been blessed with the opportunity and time to see the world and have reaped so many benefits. My adventures have given me the richest experiences to call upon to help me navigate through life's challenges. Whether it was that visit to Mother Teresa's hospital, or peering through the bushes as the African women sang together while doing their laundry along the river banks, those experiences and faces of the people are embedded in my very being. They continually define me as a person and I call upon those memories to help keep me grounded.

The following travel vignettes are just a few of my stories where I felt stronger as a Jew spiritually and humbled as a human being. I have been traveling for 45 years and have never missed a summer trip. I still haven't seen America. That will come last, as my grandmother advised. I invite you through this article to come on a journey with me through some of my most wonderful, notable, and spiritual travel experiences.

*"Mom, Dad, why can't we go to Disneyworld like the rest of my friends? Where is Haran?"*

*—Zohar Kastner, age 12*

**Trip to Haran, Eastern Turkey**

In keeping with our desire to see the world and all that it has to offer, it was my husband Josef's idea to find out where Haran is located, since Zohar's bar mitzvah parasha was *Lekh Lekha,* and what a unique bar mitzvah experience it would be

for our son to be in the actual place where God told Abraham to leave Ur and travel the road to Israel. After doing some research, we located Haran, which is in Eastern Turkey. We planned a summer trip there, and as soon as school was out, off we went. After landing in Erzurum, Turkey, we rented a car and drove miles to this remote place called Haran. It is situated near the headwaters of the Euphrates River, and nearly all the traffic between Mesopotamia and Canaan, Egypt, and the Hittite Empire had to pass through Haran. What a place it was and still is.

Standing there was standing in ancient Jewish history. There was nothing modern about Haran. The city itself was full of ruins, and the locals even showed us where Abraham's father was buried. But it was the beehive structures where the people and animals lived that really put us in a time machine back thousands of years. We were invited into one of them, and we actually felt like we had returned to archaic times. I guess we actually did. It was thrilling. The road that took us to Haran through the plains of Turkey were traveled by Abraham as he was looking for a homeland. He slept in one of these conical houses. This place was truly a treasure of our faith and how great it was to stand in such a place with my son Zohar, before reading *Lekh Lekha*. The three of us were overwhelmed by the experience, and if anything, this made his bar mitzvah parasha authentic and jump out of the pages of the Torah when he read 10 weeks later at the Kotel in Jerusalem.

*"When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them."*

—Isaiah 41:17

**Trip to Mali, Africa**

Josef and I, loving architecture and art, decided to visit Mali, Africa. We chose Mali for three reasons: First, it is known for the greatest African art, in particular, the famous Chiwara antelope wood carving. Second, we wanted to see the famous Sudanese mud architecture, specifically, the Djenne Mosque complex in the

desert. Mud architecture is a skill passed down through generations, and the buildings are entirely molded by human hands. Third, we wanted to visit Timbuktu, an entire sand city in the middle of the Sahara Desert.

Most people who visit Mali are with organizations such as Save the Children or Doctors without Borders. It is an extremely poor place. But then there was us—off to see some Unesco-protected works of human achievement with only our copy of the Lonely Planet guidebook. Never did I think that I would encounter situations and make decisions that were totally out of my consciousness. After all, I was raised in New York City and lived here my entire life and had no problem navigating the subway system and protecting myself against local robbers and scam artists.

But what do you do when you encounter 30 people, dehydrated from lack of water, running toward your vehicle in the middle of the desert, wanting to take the water that you filled in your jerrican, which was sitting on the roof our jeep? It was terrifying. Would they kill us for the water? Would they kidnap us? Would they leave us to die in the desert of dehydration? And if we gave them our water, then we would have none to continue our desert journey or worse yet, to return from where we started. I turned to Josef, who was not as panic stricken as I was, and he responded by quoting a line from the bible about giving water. He turned to the bible for answers to this serious dilemma. I was stunned at first, but where on earth could I come up with an answer to such a vexing dilemma. I went completely numb from fear of dying in the desert and becoming one of those bleached skeletons in the sand that artist Georgia O’Keeffe painted so strikingly. Should I put on my red t-shirt at this point, so my dried up bones would be visible from the air when they hopefully came looking for us, if they came looking for us? What do we do?

Josef on the other hand had faith in the people that they would not harm us and just needed to drink water badly. He also looked at the map and said we would probably find water in a few hours at the Niger River. What kind of river? I thought. The kind with parasites and diseases? But we stopped the jeep regardless of my panic. The thirsty group all came charging at us, and we poured them water, hoping for the best. Much to my surprise, they even thanked us in in Bambara. Somehow we were guided by our faith in Judaism, although this situation was beyond anything I ever thought I could encounter in my lifetime. But following Josef’s lead, relying on the wisdom from Isaiah, we helped them. We did find water later on and I was sure to say thank you to God as well!

*“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*

—Isaiah 41:10

**Timbuktu, Mali**

But the story did not end here. The following week we decided to drive to Timbuktu, which is a sand city in the middle of the Sahara Desert. Josef, now a bit more experienced after the water experience, now decided to check out the road to Timbuktu with the Minister of Roads. Could you imagine walking into the office of the Minister of Roads unannounced? We did and had a lovely chat with the man in charge. After getting the logistics, we left with a land rover, which was an animal of a vehicle, a driver speaking only Bambara, and ourselves. This time, being smarter, we took a case of water and a few sandwiches. One small detail that was left out by the Minister of Roads, was that roads in the Sahara were only tracks from the jeep that traveled before you. Asphalt, which I earned a new respect for in Africa, ended one hour into our journey and we were only following faint tracks in the sand. It was nerve-racking, and I was asking myself all the way how I allowed myself to get into this situation. It was like my travel passion had run away with my brain power.

But we made it after 13 hours of travel to this magnificent sand city with a glorious skyline as we approached. The Tuareg tribe people, clothed in indigo blue robes, riding camels, were in the entrance of the city to greet us, as if they knew we were coming. We found the one hotel to stay in, while our driver Ollie insisted on sleeping on the roof of the jeep. I was not particularly excited about returning the same way back to Bamako, the capital, so when four stranded young people from the Peace Corp asked if they could hitchhike back with us, I said “yes” and was thrilled to have some youth and muscle along for the scary ride. We walked around Timbuktu for two days in sheer amazement that a city could be built from sand. It was really one giant sand castle. Of course it needed constant repair, which you could see happening on every building. And while they were repairing, the sandstorms were constantly blowing, making it even more of a challenge to keep the city from being swallowed up by the forces of nature. It was fascinating, and we even got to meet the mayor of the sand town and his two wives.

But getting back to the hitchhikers, it was a good thing that they came with us, because on the way back, our jeep sank into quicksand, like in one of those horror movies, sinking half-way down until it hit solid sand. We could not even open the door of the car and had to climb out the window. Apparently it had rained and it was our hard luck that not only did the sand turn to mud, but the tracks in the sand from the car before us (the so-called road) had disappeared. The car went down, there was no road and now we had no direction. We only had the compass to rely on that Josef to this day wears on his watchband. So, with only our bare hands and steel plates that our driver had luckily brought along, we all took turns digging the car out with our bare hands. It was hours of tiresome work, and did I mention—we had no water left. We formed a dam to help stop the mud from flowing but as the sun was setting, the desert started to cool off and the mud started to crack and dry up.

After an intense powwow, it was decided that we were not going to attempt moving the car until morning. So we all decided to go to sleep at this point to conserve our energy. We slept either in the jeep, under it, on top of it, on the side of it, or near it until morning. I never closed my eyes, as a hoot here and there kept my panic attack going and with eyes wide open, I became a terrified night watchman. We considered at one point walking 50 kilometers at night which was the estimation of the nearest town, but everyone was too exhausted for that. And who knew how long our flashlight batteries would last.

And so it was—we waited until morning to push the car out of the sand. We did manage to get the jeep going eventually, and with long broken-off petrified tree branches, Josef and the Peace Corp boys surveyed the terrain looking for safe places to drive the car. The girls and I were filtering mud through a handkerchief and added a few drops of emergency iodine drops to the bit of water that we managed to salvage. We would of course only drink it if we were at death’s door as it was a watery mud cocktail. Yuck!

We did finally make it back to a town, starving and thirsty, and the two boys were dropped at the hospital as they were suffering from malaria. The luggage rack of the car was kaput at this point and fell off. The jeep literally plowed through trees and anything in the way and we even had to cross a river with the vehicle. Stones were put in the water to keep us afloat.

Now you might ask at this point what this experience did for me spiritually, except for the fact that I had to turn to God at many moments to pray that we come out of this adventure alive. Josef quite honestly was worried about making it back to the hotel before Shabbat. But I will attempt to answer this question on a

different level. I have come to realize through this harrowing experience that the circumstances of our life are not always in control. Humankind likes to think in straight lines. We leave from a departure point and arrive at our destination. But the dessert terrain throws you completely off. Maybe I experienced something like the Israelites felt when they left Egypt and took all the riches with them. What good did the riches do in the desert? I actually thought of them while undergoing this experience. Can I ever again take water for granted, or solitude, or a road, or food, or a compass or a comfortable bed to sleep in? The desert tests you, and I managed to pass the test, perhaps with a very low grade, but I passed. And the Israelites wandered the desert for 40 years? What a remarkable people!

*“The opposite of love is not hate; it’s indifference.”*

—Elie Wiesel

**Trip to Crete, Greece**

Just this past summer, Josef and I took a trip to Crete, Greece. Oh, those gorgeous Greek islands where people come from all over the world to just swim, sun, and rejoice in one of God’s paradises. It is stunning in scenery and just a place to enjoy nature at its finest. We try to go each summer, and this year, we met a delightful couple who were staying in our 10-room hotel. They were about our age, and they both recently retired and chose Crete as their first stop to celebrate their newfound freedom. They were from Germany.

Since we were the only two couples staying in this small hotel, we ended up eating our meals together on the lovely tavern overlooking the Libyan Sea. We told them about our life, children, and work and shared experiences about traveling. They did the same. It was only during Shabbat while sitting on the taverna that they asked which town we would be driving to today. They knew we liked to explore the towns and really didn’t take a swim until very late in the day. We told them that it was Saturday and we don’t drive on Saturdays. They asked why. We told them that we were Jewish and Saturday is our Sabbath. She froze. Had she never met a Jew before? She looked at us with piercing eyes. Now I know

why you have never visited Germany she said. We responded, “yes.” Then her eyes filled with tears and she came over to me and put her arms around me with a tight hug. She said, “What can I say about such an ugly part of history that is so difficult to understand. I apologize for my country,” she said, “I apologize for Germany for what we did to your people. I apologize, I am so sorry.” She continued to weep. I had never encountered any German person who apologized to me personally for their country and the atrocities that they committed. We were both silent and I honored the silence. She did too.

*“In school, my friends called me ‘Fish.’ As a child, my grandmother used to prepare gefilte fish, using the bathtub as an aquarium until it was time for the slaughter. The fish and its scales have been a recurring image in my architecture, probably because the scent of the fish has clung to me all these years.”*

—Frank Gehry

**Trip to Bilbao, Spain**

Frank Gehry, whose Hebrew name is Ephraim, is acclaimed as being the greatest architect of the twenty-first century. He just recently received a Medal of Freedom award from President Obama. He is most well-known for his exquisite masterpiece—The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, which is a magnificent example of the most groundbreaking architecture done in titanium with undulating curves that were all conceived and designed on a computer. It is innovative, highly unique, and world-famous.

Wanting to see it, Josef and I traveled to Bilbao, Spain for a long weekend, just to see this architectural wonder. We rented the audio tour to take around the museum with us. As I was listening to the recording about the inspiration for the design of the museum, I was shocked to hear about Gehry’s description of his childhood experience of fish-watching. What I mean by fish-watching is that when he was a child, his parents, who were the children of Russian and Polish immigrants used to keep fish swimming in the bathtub before the Jewish Holidays.

As a youngster, this vision must have been a bit disturbing, but right before the holiday, his mom would scoop the fish from the tub, club the fish to death, and then take it to the kitchen to prepare a special fish concoction for the holiday meal. Of course I thought, as I remembered hearing those stories from my grandmother! This was all in preparation for the making of the gefilte fish. Fresh fish, swimming around in the bathtub until it was time to grind it into that molded lump of sweet boneless cold fish stewed with carrots and onions and covered with horseradish.

But it was this sight of the fish wiggling and slithering around in the tub that became the influence for one of the world's greatest innovative pieces of architecture. The image of the shiny scales of the fish were turned into titanium rectangles strategically placed in an undulating pattern with curves that captured the movement of the fish squirming in the limited space of a bathtub. Who would ever imagine that one of the most sophisticated works of architecture in the world would all be credited to the Jewish Holidays and the start of a holiday meal with that delicious piece of gefilte fish? Go figure that the power of building in a new and different way with the use of a computer could come from a traditional Ashkenazic food. That piece of sweet fish to commence a holiday meal has now risen to the heights of sophistication and actually does taste better after seeing the influence that it has had on the modern world.

*Then you will go safely on your way, and you will not hurt your foot. When you lie down, you will not be afraid.*

*—Proverbs 3:23–24*

**Trip to Bali, Indonesia**

One of the most beautiful places in the world is Bali, Indonesia. Bali is the only island in Indonesia that is Hindu. It is an artist's paradise filled with beautiful wood and stone carvings of Hindu deities, and the Balinese people are often taught from a young age how to make these beautiful sculptures. Their artistry is part of a tradition that is passed down from generation to generation. And when we do get the opportunity to visit Bali, we even like to stay in a wood-carving village called Mas, where we can watch the artisans at work enjoy their traditional craft.

Josef and I went twice in our life to this exotic paradise, and both times we were blown away by the natural beauty and by the peacefulness of the island. Bali has an aura of being truly blessed and the people seem to appreciate all that they have. One beautiful sight you see everywhere is the people bringing offerings to the gods at the temples. These offerings are shallow baskets made out of leaves with incense sticks protruding out, along with and an assortment of oils and other beautiful things. For example, if you just had rice and meat for lunch, a little bit of it goes into the offering, which eventually will be left at a chosen religious statue or in front of a home. It is the here and the now that is representational of the Hindu culture, and it is in those offerings to the gods that they express their appreciation for what they have. It is another way of giving thanks.

One morning, when Josef and I were ready to embark on a journey around the island and we checked out of our hotel, there was a surprise waiting for us outside. Our rented car was surrounded by garlands of jasmine flowers and incense. Local people were gathered around our vehicle and they were praying for our safe journey. They thanked both Josef and me and their gods for bringing us to their beautiful island. It reminded me of the prayer that we say before a journey for a safe trip, *Tefilat haDerekh*. Of course the color, the smell of the flowers, and the incense added to the prayers, but the wish was the same. Halfway around the world, strangers wish each other safe travels. Every time I say the *Tefilat haDerekh* prayer before a trip, I think of the Balinese people who so elaborately demonstrated their wish for us.

*“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.”*

—Marcus Garvey

**Trip to Sfax, Tunisia**

One of our most interesting trips was to Tunisia. Sfax, which is the second largest city in Tunisia, is not a particularly touristy place, but after doing much research, we decided to make our way to Sfax, which has two old beautiful synagogues, a medina, and some old ruins. We had a picture and an address of the old synagogue, so that was going to be our first stop. The streets were difficult to

navigate so we had to keep asking for help along the way.

Finally, we were led to a synagogue, the Azria synagogue, but it looked nothing at all like the picture that we had. We asked a man on the street if there was another synagogue and he said to follow him. He took us into a shop and we looked for a person who spoke English. The woman in the shop said, wait here. In a few minutes, a man of about 65 came to the store and told us his name was Azriel. We told him we were looking for an old synagogue and showed him the picture. He told us to follow him. The event made me a bit nervous as I was now following a stranger through the streets of a foreign country looking for a synagogue. But along the way he was greeted with friendly hellos by young people who he said were his students. He was a math professor at the University. I felt a bit relieved. He also quietly told us that he was Jewish and there were only six Jews left in the town of Sfax, which was once a thriving community.

And then suddenly we spotted the synagogue—the same one that was in the photograph. It was called The Beth El synagogue, and it was large and had a place of prominence on the street. There was broken glass and garbage littering the porch and barricades around it with a security guard stationed in a small booth. We asked our new friend Azriel if we could see the inside and he looked at us puzzled. Do you want to really go inside? We said yes, very much so. So he said to wait and he will return shortly. So we waited patiently next to the security guard, trying to make conversation, and after about an hour, a taxi pulled up with Azriel and a very old hunched over man. The man carried a large keychain with rusty castle like keys dangling from the ring. He spoke no English, so Azriel was our translator. Azriel, the old man, two detectives and the security guard were now all trying to open the front door to the synagogue with those rusty old keys. It took a while until they found the right one.

And so we entered this once beautiful building where bird droppings and broken glass littered the floor. The old man still had very little to say and Josef tried to talk to him but it went nowhere. He asked if he was Jewish and he didn't respond. Perhaps he was fearful with the two detectives. Then Josef thought how nice it would be to chant the popular psalm "*Asherei yoshevei veitekha*." The old man lit up and continued to chant out loud with "*Od yehalelukha selah*." And so they continued. He knew it all by heart and was glowing as he recited the words. They were singing to God in an old deserted synagogue, and it was glorious. It was probably many years since the walls of that synagogue heard Jewish prayers. I was watching in amazement and as I looked at the two detectives, the security guard, and Azriel, all of us with tears streaming down our faces. What an

emotional experience!

Azriel then took the castle keys out again and attempted to open the lock attached to a long bar that opened the cabinet to the Sifrei Torah. I felt like Indiana Jones who just raided the lost ark. They were very elaborate and we offered to arrange to have them brought to Israel where they would be preserved, since this synagogue had obviously seen better days. They declined. We imagined that the Torahs are believed to protect the entire town and it was out of the question to remove them. But how precious a moment for us, that we got the rare opportunity to be with the last few Jews in Sfax, in an old synagogue, with two Muslim detectives. Who would believe the treasures we found were these two elderly Jewish men, singing to God in an abandoned synagogue!

*“If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one.”*

—Mother Teresa

**Trip to Kolkata, India**

One of the creepiest places that we visited was Calcutta, India in the 1980s. It was not only poor, but many of the inhabitants lived on the streets in shabby dwellings with no sewage or basic amenities. There was disease and malnutrition all around us, and it was shockingly sad to see. And all of this was amidst some exquisite colonial architecture. But it was a part of the world too, so we decided to go. I am glad that we did.

There were many volunteers from many foreign countries who came to help. Mother Teresa spent much time in Kolkata, and her famous hospital called “Mother Teresa’s Hospital for the Dead and Dying” was a landmark where we got the opportunity to meet some extraordinary young people who came even on their honeymoon through their churches to help out in her hospital. This was a far cry from the usual honeymoon vacation that we know about in the states. One such couple that we met at breakfast invited us to join them in their morning assignment in the hospital. We decided to do it, so we went with them. I was surprised seeing the name on the front of the hospital—Hospital for the Dead and Dying—as it really struck me as strange to put such a name on a hospital. Don’t

we go to the hospital to try to get better?

We stepped through the door and both Josef and I stopped in our tracks. There were wall-to-wall cots with a skeleton human being in each bed. It was horrifying. Terrified, we entered and asked this young couple what they were dying of. The purpose of the volunteers they told us was to make their existence easier and more comfortable before their death. They told me that they were dying of malnutrition and infections, things that we conquered a long time ago with antibiotics, vitamins, and nutritious food. I asked if I could run back to my hotel and bring antibiotics from my suitcase, or a bag of peanuts, or some juice. Perhaps I could save just one life? Was there any reason why these poor souls had to die when the cures were so in reach? I am still soul-searching to come up with answers to this question. To keep them just comfortable with a cool washcloth or a smile seemed useless to me, when I had the cure with me in my hotel room. But I was discouraged to do so and was told it would not help. That picture never leaves me. It certainly makes you realize how important it is to give charity to food banks, hospitals, and research to help people where solutions can be made available. The intelligence behind the concept of relieving the plight of the poor and underprivileged in Judaism certainly took on a more pronounced meaning for me in Kolkata. Nobody in the world should enter a hospital for the dead and dying from malnutrition and ailments we have cures for. Nobody.

*“Look at situations from all angles and you will become more open.”*

—Dalai Lama

**Trip to Bhutan and Tibet**

Two of our most amazing trips were to Bhutan and Tibet. Bhutan is a small kingdom sandwiched between India and China, and it has only recently put itself on the tourist map, allowing the west to penetrate into this very secluded Tibetan Buddhist culture. It is also a very expensive country to visit because of its remoteness and limited number of visas that are allotted each year. Unfortunately, the standard of living in Bhutan is quite low, although there is a good educational system and plenty of food and medical facilities. Strangely, there is still a national dress which is mandatory for residents and a national style

of architecture.

At the time of our trip about 23 years ago, television and movies were banned there, and you could not even find Coca-Cola. The king, who was in full command, was happily married to four sisters, each with her own house, situated on a mountain slope in close proximity to each other. It certainly makes it easier on the king to have only one set of in-laws! And people in Bhutan are known to be very happy, living in their Himalayan Shangri-La amidst the highest mountains in the world dotted with ancient temples and monastic life.

I had my eyes set on Bhutan for years as I wanted to see this extraordinary place. But it was very difficult to get a visa, as they only allowed a small amount of tourists in each year, and the government was very selective about granting visas. So, year after year, I tried to get a visa through the consulate with no luck. Eventually, only by taking a stroll on Shabbat with Zohar and Josef and striking up a conversation with the salesman in a carpet shop, did we get three visas to enter Bhutan as guests of the Royal Government. Zohar was the one who noticed the sign on the store—Tibetan carpets. Apparently, the Tibetan rug salesman was a relative of the governor of Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan, and through his contacts the three of us got two-week visas to visit any part of Bhutan we chose along with a private guide and driver. We also got permits to enter many of the Buddhist Dzongs, which are temple complexes, many of them over 1,000 years old. And all of this for the grand total of $200.00 for the three of us.

In addition, part of the visa requirement was for me to visit the art school to see traditional Bhutanese painting and to tell them about American art education. And so it was. We flew to Bhutan with Zohar sitting in the cockpit next to the pilot. Flying over the Himalayas was jaw-dropping. Once arriving, our first stop had to be the art school, and I was indeed shocked to see that students were human Xerox machines, having to draw complicated and detailed dragons over and over again until the image was etched into their memories. It had to be a perfect replica and after they mastered one, they were then given another Xerox to copy. If art was their chosen field, which their parents decided at an early age, they were put into the art school, where they only learned English and art. There was not an ounce of creativity to be found anywhere in the art school, and I was shocked to see that a school like this existed.

One of the students asked me to look at his own personal art and offer some constructive criticism. For that, we had to drive to his home. He did a beautiful painting, an exact rendering of a temple as he saw it. I told him it would be fun to add some mountain flowers in the foreground to give it more life and

interest, but he was puzzled by my suggestion as there were no flowers in front of the temple. He could not comprehend that you could add something into a work of art from your imagination. I wish I could have painted the expression on his face. He was shocked and actually threatened by such an idea. Even Zohar was shocked by his response. I told him to just think about it for a few days, hoping he would get used to the idea. He never did.

But the most intriguing of our experiences in Bhutan were the long discussions we would have with our young guide named Timlay. And here is where Judaism came into play. While sipping Tibetan tea on a mountain slope, taking in the stunning scenery, Timlay was describing his belief in Buddhism. Josef then asked Timlay, "If you found $200 (which is equivalent in the United States to $200,000) on the ground, what would you do with it?" Timlay did not even stop to contemplate an answer. He immediately said he would give half to a poor person and half to the Buddhist temple. Then he asked Josef what he would do with the money. Josef said he would use the money to invest and participate in a local business where he could make much more money, and then perhaps he could feed everybody in the monastery from the business. Timlay found it very hard to understand such a concept and it troubled him for days. The question is, of course, how does a nation flourish and progress? Josef repeated to Timlay that the two of them could work in the local business and provide food every day and give goods to the poor and give charity as well to the temple. This is perhaps a more constructive solution for the $200 found money. Timlay's mentality was that there could only be one solution. He was never allowed to contemplate finding various solutions to a problem. In Judaism, we encourage creative thinking to find solutions. This is a concept that we take for granted. It was shocking for Josef and me and even Zohar that this young man from another culture could not understand this.

*"You cannot create experience. You must undergo it."*

—Albert Camus

**Trip to Istanbul, Turkey**

On one of our trips to Istanbul, we got the rare opportunity through a Muslim friend of ours to attend a mosque service that included the Sufi Whirling

Dervishes, a mystical branch of Islam, with fascinating rituals. The Sufis are an old sect who believe that closeness with God is achieved by elaborate whirling that slowly and methodically leads you into a trance. Our friend Omer drove us to this elaborate mosque complex, and I was instructed to go upstairs, where the women were seated on the floor. I also had to cover my hair completely with the traditional scarf. This was not a tourist show, but the real thing, and Josef and I were very excited to have the rare opportunity to not only witness it, but to participate in it. Josef was seated downstairs next to our friend Omer. They were kind enough to bring him a chair.

Once it started, I realized that I was totally sandwiched in between rows of women and there would be no way to leave if I wanted to get out. There wasn't an ounce of empty space and no passage for a quick escape if it got too intense for me. And so it was, the men below were chanting and twirling in a frightening rhythm, starting slowly and getting more intense as he continued. The women were swaying and undulating while sitting shoulder to shoulder to a much defined rhythmic pattern. It kept getting louder and fiercer and it actually was quite frightening. And as the twirling leader gained momentum with his whirling and spinning, so did his voice and so did we. I didn't have to move. The women moved me, while one of them was constantly pushing any stray hair that had fallen out from under my head scarf back in. It was forbidden to show any hair in this mosque. I could very well see how people could fall into a hypnotic trance or an altered state of consciousness by the repetition, swaying, and voice of the leader. It was strong and unnerving, like a sort of run-away train getting louder and louder and more intense. I was very much relieved when it was all over and was anxious to meet Josef and Omer outside to hear of their experience. I definitely entered a surreal place both mentally and physically and was happy to be out of there. I couldn't help but think of the Zohar, not my son Zohar, but the mystical Kabbalists in Judaism. Being unfamiliar with both the Sufis and the Kabbalists, I did realize one thing. Both seek to unlock some inner world or offer some spiritual advancement. Is it really possible to transcend time and space by performing spinning rituals or studying the Zohar? Is it all to seek an escape from the chaotic world around us? All I know is that I will take that night at the mosque to the grave with me. But until then, I will continue to ponder that night of mysticism that I was so fortunate to participate in. When Omer comes to visit New York next time, I must find an equal enlightening experience in Judaism to share with him. Any ideas?

*“Blessed are YOU, Lord our God, King of the Universe,*

*Who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us about removing the hametz.”*

**Las Fallas Festival in Valencia, Spain**

On the 15th through the 19th of March every year, a crazy festival takes place in Valencia, Spain. One year we were lucky enough to stumble upon it by accident, and it was so insane but so fantastic, that we have been returning ever since. It is called Las Fallas, and it is a festival of loud noise, fire, fireworks, pageantry, and incredible artistry. Enormous cardboard, wooden, plastic, cork, plaster, and papier mâché figures of enormous size, sometimes reaching over 60 feet high, are constructed during the year by chosen artists. These are placed in various plazas in Valencia. Some of the figures are well-known local personalities, and some are made especially for children. But most are satirical versions of international politicians and celebrities.

All day long, as tourists look at these sculptures, there are processions taking place and pyrotechnical explosions all over the city. You feel the earth shake, and it sounds like you are in a war zone—smoke and all. At the end of this festival there is a fire parade at night through the city, and all of these sculptures are stuffed with fireworks and are blown up. Yes, the fire department is there and surrounds each sculpture to put out the fires while the crowd watches in excitement, cheering as these fantastic works of art meet their demise. It is one big bizarre street festival and is great fun to see.

The origin of this festival, as explained to us, is a celebration of Saint Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters. It was a Middle Age custom to burn candle holders that held their candles during the dark winter months. When spring comes, they don’t need the candle holders anymore, so they set them on fire. That has been the standard explanation of Las Fallas. But recently, while traveling in Madrid and visiting the Sofia Reina museum to see Picasso’s most famous painting, *Guernica*, we stumbled upon the real explanation of the Las Fallas Festival, or at least an explanation that made more sense. We were lucky enough to take an English tour with an expert of Picasso and *Guernica*. He was so knowledgeable about the details in the painting and so intelligent, that I could not resist asking him at the end of the tour, if he knew anything about Las Fallas festival in Valencia and its

origin.

He responded with an affirmative yes, and he then asked us if we ever heard of the Jews. Not wanting to blow our cover, we responded that yes, we have heard of the Jews. He then told us that each spring the Jews who lived in Spain had a strange custom of doing a sort of spring cleaning and then they would burn food in bonfires outside their homes. He told us that this was the real origin of Las Fallas Festival. Josef and I looked at each other and we said to him with a big smile, I think that it had something to do with a holiday called Passover. He responded, “Yes!”

Now I always have said that “You don’t come to Spain to be Jewish.” Spain has other things to offer, but Jewish history was wiped out with the stroke of a pen by Isabella and Ferdinand in 1492. That is, unless of course you come to Las Fallas festival in Valencia. Here, through fire and caricature, the Jews and their culture left their influence in a grandiose, fiery, and cunningly creative way.

*“How numerous are thy works, O Lord! You made them all in wisdom;*

*The earth is full of your creations.”*

—Psalms 104:24

Of course an article such as this would not be complete without mentioning Mother Nature and all of the wonders of the world. If one ever doubted the existence of God, just take a safari in South Africa to see the animals in their natural habitat. Can you imagine what the Ark must have looked like with all of those magnificent creatures? Don’t miss the Taj Mahal in Agra, India, which in my opinion is the most beautiful piece of architecture ever created in memory of a beloved departed wife. Mt. Everest in Tibet is a powerful sight along with the Karakorum Highway in Pakistan, and Annapurna mountain range in Nepal. They are a constant reminder that nature can be challenged but inevitably is in control. Try traveling the silk route across China on public transportation and marvel at the variety of people and places along the way. Sleep in the sand under the stars of Sinai, visit the Zen Gardens of Japan, feast your eyes on the sunflower fields in Spain, and watch the people worship the Ganges as they cremate their dead along the river banks. Machu Picchu, the pyramids of Giza, the 2,000 pagodas in Pagan, Burma, along with the Angor Wat in Cambodia are all well worth a trip.

They will never cease to amaze and whether they were God-created or the gift of creativity given by God to humanity, the world has some astonishing things to see and are well worth going beyond our *daled amot*, to take a look. All of these wonders are an affirmation of God's handiwork and are among my favorites. But let's not forget what tops the list of the awesome and powerful. The airplane. We are blessed to live in the jet age that includes kosher food, movies, and even wi-fi on board. I am forever grateful to Orville and Wilbur Wright for sticking with their idea against all odds. Without them, all of this would be impossible.

*"The purpose of life is to perfect ones character."*

—The Vilna Gaon

**My Final Thoughts**

So here ends just a few of my experiences with Josef and Zohar that not only influenced my life, but in the process, confirmed to me the genius of the Jewish people. Travel is and will always remain a wonderful way to invest in yourself, and the world is a great classroom. That is why I will continue to travel as long as I can. I still hear my grandmother's wise words, and I know that she is sitting on my shoulder for every trip. By exploring, growing, making new friends, witnessing other cultures, and walking the streets of history, I have far more to think about and reflect upon as I grow older. I have been truly blessed with not only rich memories of colorful places and people, but through my personal lens of travel, I have also developed a much deeper appreciation of the gift of Judaism.